

L O U N G E R.

[N^o LII.]

Saturday, Jan. 28. 1786.

On peut ebaucher un portrait en peu des mots ; mais le détailler exactement, c'est un ouvrage sans fin.

MARIVAUX.

“**M**OST Women have no characters at all.” So says a poet of great good sense, and of much observation on human character. I own, however, that I am not very willing to acknowledge the truth of the proposition. I admit that there is a certain sameness in the situation of our women, which is apt to give a similarity to their manner and turn of mind ; but I am persuaded there is a foundation of diversity in the characters of women as strong as in those of men. The features of the first, indeed, are more delicate, less strongly marked, and on that account more difficult to be distinguished ; but still the difference equally exists. In their faces, the features of men are stronger than those of women ; but the difference of one woman’s face from another is not therefore the less real. So it is, in my opinion, with their minds.

I have been lately more than ever disposed to deny the truth of Mr *Pope*’s observation, from an acquaintance with two Ladies, who, in situations nearly alike, without that difference which vicissitudes of fortune, or uncommon incidents in life, might produce, are in character perfectly dissimilar. I never indeed knew two characters more pointedly different, than those of Mrs *Williams* and Mrs *Hambden*. Mrs *Williams* is a woman of plain good sense, and of great justness of conduct. She was early married to a man of good understanding, and in a respectable situation of life. He married her, because he wished for a wife who could be as useful as well as an agreeable companion to him, and would make a good mother to his children. She married him, because she thought him a worthy man, with whom she could be happy. Neither the husband nor the wife are remarkable for taste or refinement ; but they have both such a stock of sense, as prevents their ever falling into any impropriety. Mrs *Williams* conducts the affairs of her family with the greatest regularity and exactness ; and she never feels herself above giving attention to any particular of domestic œconomy. The education of their sons she leaves almost entirely to her husband ; that of the daughters she considers as peculiarly belonging to her. Believing the great truths, and attentive to the great doctrines of religion, she never troubled herself with its intricacies ; and following,

ing, in morality, the plain path of right, she never speculated on points of delicate embarrassment. To her daughters, in like manner, she never taught mystery in religion, or casuistry in morals; but she instills into them the most obvious and useful principles in both. She allows them to mix in the world to a certain degree, and to associate with companions of their own age and rank; but she guards against every thing which might give them a romantic turn. Having little imagination herself, she removes from her daughters every thing by which theirs might be warmed: Novels that melt, and Dramas that agitate the mind, she is at pains to prevent their getting a taste for. Even a relish for music she seems to wish to discourage.

Mrs Williams is in every thing candour itself. Indeed, she never feels any thing which she would wish to conceal. Her good sense makes her always fix on her plan of conduct with firmness, and as she is not perplexed with any difficulties, or encumbered with any doubts about its being right, she always takes the direct road to accomplish the end she has in view. Upon the whole, Mrs Williams is more respectable than many who seem formed to command more respect, and happier than many who seem to have more avenues for happiness.

Mrs *Hambden* possesses a mind of a much superior order to that of Mrs Williams. She is indeed one of the most accomplished women I ever knew. With an uncommon portion of acuteness and discernment, she possesses the highest degree of taste and refinement. Her conversation is ever animated, and ever improving; and a delicate sense of virtue, as well as a warmth of sensibility, which runs through every thing she says, creates an attachment to her, and gives to her discourse (to use an expression of *Sir William Temple's*), that *race*, without which discourse as well as wine is insipid. Intimately acquainted with human nature, she possesses the quickest discernment and the truest knowledge of every character that comes within her observation; and yet, from a native generosity of mind, she is ever willing to make allowance for the weaknesses or follies of others. With such accomplishments, and so much worth, it is natural to suppose, that Mrs Hambden will exhibit in every part of her conduct a pattern of perfection; and yet, from the very possession of those endowments, she seems to fail in those parts of conduct in which Mrs Williams, with much inferior talents and accomplishments, appears to succeed. Mrs Hambden's superior acuteness and penetration, far from enabling her to fix upon a certain steady uniform line of conduct, frequently produce only doubt, uncertainty, and hesitation. To whichever side she turns she sees difficulties; difficulties which her discernment enables her to perceive, and her imagination tends to magnify. When resolved, she is but half-resolved; she begins to doubt that she has determined wrong; thinks of varying her plan, and becomes more and more uncertain how to proceed. Even after she is completely fixed as to the object, she wavers

vers as to the means of attaining it, and obstacles are constantly starting up in her idea which she knows not how to surmount. This not only produces a vacillancy in her conduct, but at times gives her the appearance of a want of fairness; she wishes to disguise her own perplexity to herself, and this leads her to assume somewhat of disguise to others. Uncertain of the justness or expediency of her own conduct, afraid of the light in which it may appear, she but half communicates resolutions of which she doubts the propriety, and half conceals intentions which she is afraid to fulfil.

Mrs Hambden was left, not long after her marriage, a widow, with one son and one daughter, and since her husband's death her whole care has centred in these children. From her anxiety with regard to her son, she has taken the management of his education upon herself. From her eager wish to conduct him in the paths of virtue, and to secure him from the snares of vice, she has kept him almost constantly under her own eye; she has prevented him from going to a public school, and has hardly allowed him any companions. The boy is now about fifteen; with wonderful learning and knowledge for his years, and possessed of the finest and most amiable dispositions; but from his mode of education, he is awkward, timid, and perfectly ignorant of the world. With the world, however, he must soon mix; and what change this may produce in his character is uncertain. It is much to be feared that that very purity and refinement of mind, of which he is possessed, and which certainly has been preserved by his seclusion from the world, may produce very fatal consequences to him on his entrance into life. If he retains this extreme purity and refinement untainted, there is danger lest he become disgusted with and unfit for a world, many of the maxims and practices of which he will find very different from the lessons he has received from too fond a mother. But the danger is still greater that his purity and refinement may leave him; being introduced into the world, not gradually, but all at once, not being taught by degrees to struggle with and resist the corruptions around him, he may fall into the very opposite extreme from that in which he has been led, and desert from the refinement and severity of virtue to the grossness and licentiousness of vice. He will meet with vice in colours that often dazzle rather than shock inexperience like his; and his weakness may sometimes yield where his inclination may not be seduced. The boldness of confident folly may overthrow his wisest resolutions; and the laugh of shallow ridicule triumph over his best-founded principles.

Mrs Hambden's daughter is at this moment the most amiable girl I ever knew. Here I am at a loss whether to find fault with the education her mother has given her or not? Mrs Hambden's object has been to bestow upon her every accomplishment which can adorn the female character: Music and drawing, the French and Italian languages, she is mistress of; her reading is extensive;
her

her taste exquisite; her judgement delicate: and yet I confess, I am not less afraid than I am interested about this girl's fate. Her soul is too refined for the common, but useful and necessary departments of life; and that imagination which she has enlivened and cultivated, may be to her the source of infinite distress. While her mother lives, even her support may not always protect her daughter, nor ensure that peace of mind which feeling may betray, or fancy mislead. But what a change in her situation must that parent's death produce! If she remains unmarried, I fear she will be little able to struggle with the harsh difficulties of a single state; for reading and refinement, far from enabling the female mind to grapple with its situation, have rather a tendency to soften and enfeeble it. Should she marry, and I am persuaded she never will, unless she finds a man whom she thinks worthy of her most ardent affection, in that state also she is not less exposed to unhappiness. Even supposing she should meet with a husband (and there are few such) every way worthy of her, it is to be feared that her extreme delicacy may give her many uneasinesses, and create an anxiety which it will not be easy to cure. If from that ignorance of the characters of the men, to which every woman is exposed, she should be unlucky in her choice, her danger is dreadful!

But I have wandered somewhat from my purpose, which was to illustrate the difference between the two Ladies in question; and to shew, against the too decisive apothegm of the Poet, the possible discrimination of female character. Yet, in tracing those different persons through the different plans of education for their children, I am not sure if I have not stumbled upon something intimately as well as usefully connected with my subject. If there are very distinguishing features in female as well as in male characters, it is for mothers to mark their features, to watch betimes their different propensities. Education can do much to confirm goodness, to correct depravity of temper and of disposition: And in characters more common than either of those extremes, education can give exertion to indolence, refinement to insensibility, strength to the weak, and support to the too susceptible mind,—can call forth talents into usefulness, and bestow happiness upon virtue.

E D I N B U R G H :

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